

“Non à la Biennale de São Paulo”

On Monday, 16 June 1969, a group of artists and intellectuals gathered at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art to discuss the storm surrounding the X São Paulo Biennial, now only months away. Scheduled to open in September in Ibirapuera Park, the biennial was expected to include representations from over sixty countries. The first group of artists selected to represent France had withdrawn in protest against the stringent dictates of Brazil's military regime; now, it seemed, a second, provisional delegation might be in jeopardy as well. The meeting began with a number of Brazilian artists giving personal testimonies to the political situation in their country: the media and the arts were under censorship, and works of art containing any controversial aspects, sexual imagery, or political content were banned from the Brazilian public's view.¹ The assembled crowd listened as a dossier entitled “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” was read aloud: it recounted the latest events involving cultural repression in Brazil under the military regime; broadly denounced the repression of politicians, intellectuals, and artists, which had already resulted in the suspension of the civil and political rights of numerous individuals; and decried the imprisonment and persecution of Brazilian cultural figures, including the musicians Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Geraldo Vandré, the filmmaker Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, and the



1. Cover of dossier “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” (1969).

directors of the two major newspapers based in Rio de Janeiro, *Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal do Brasil* (see dossier “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” in appendix 1)² (figure 1).

After heated debate, the crowd in Paris enthusiastically agreed to a boycott in solidarity with the Brazilian artists who were living and working under censorship; France would not participate in the X São Paulo Biennial. The event would go on but with a fraction of the art it might have showcased—many countries, including the United States, Holland, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, the Soviet Union, the Dominican Republic, and Spain, would soon limit or cancel their participation, and some 80 percent of the artists originally invited declined to attend—with significant representation of the many international art tendencies that made the late 1960s such an exciting era. The international

biennials of Brazil, and particularly that of São Paulo, its first, were the life-blood of new developments in the visual arts, and in the absence of enthusiastic participation from abroad, the artistic community would remain isolated from the most current international trends and ideas. It was a hard pill to swallow for a country struggling under the grip of the repressive regime, but nevertheless the boycott received significant support from the local and the international artistic communities.

The São Paulo Biennials

By the late 1960s the São Paulo Biennial had for over a decade been the primary venue in Brazil for artistic innovation and exposure to international trends; indeed, the emergence of new visual languages in Brazil is inextricably intertwined with the history of the various important São Paulo biennials. By 1951 the Italian-born industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo (b. Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho; 1892–1977) had set his sights on an ambitious exhibition of art from around the globe to be held in São Paulo. Part of a growing movement to bring Brazil into the cosmopolitan realm inhabited by so many other industrialized countries, the Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (later the Bienal Internacional de São Paulo) was conceived with a twofold goal: to integrate Brazil into the mainstream visual arts circuit and to establish São Paulo as the most important international art center in Latin America. The event, modeled on the Venice Biennial (founded in 1895), would host national representations as well as international exhibitions held under the direction of rotating chief curators.

The I São Paulo Biennial, held in 1951, became a turning point in the evolving debate between figuration and abstraction, shifting the balance toward abstraction with the bestowal of its major international sculpture prize to a stainless steel construction by the Swiss artist Max Bill, formerly a student at the Bauhaus and soon to become the cofounder and director of the Ulm School of Design in Germany, one of the most important efforts in Europe to recover the legacy of the Bauhaus after it was closed by the Nazis in 1933.³ Based on the continuous surface of the Möbius strip, Bill's *Tripartite Unity* (1948–49) (figure 2) was an elegant representation of the artist's theoretical ideas, which dismissed artists' subjectivity and intuition in favor of geometric abstraction based on rationality, mathematics, and systematic constructions. The artist's presence at the first São Paulo Biennial was a springboard for major developments in Brazilian art; throughout the 1950s



2. Max Bill, *Unidade Tripartite*, 1948–49. Stainless steel. Courtesy of Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo (Coleção de Arte do Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo). © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ProLitteris, Zürich.

Brazilian artists, eager to break away from regionalism and local themes and to experiment with a more universal language in the visual arts, began to embrace the objective philosophies of Bill and other international proponents of geometric abstract art and started to adopt and individuate global trends in nonfigurative art.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the São Paulo biennials continued to introduce Brazilians to new works of art and developing trends on the international scene, and the event's influence was reflected in the rise of new vanguard movements in the visual arts in Brazil. The first São Paulo Biennial led to the founding of groups dedicated to geometric abstraction: in São Paulo, Grupo Ruptura, founded by Waldemar Cordeiro in 1952; and in Rio de Janeiro, Grupo Frente, led by Ivan Serpa and founded in 1953.⁴ Issues and practices introduced by Grupo Ruptura, in turn, mobilized most of the artistic debates in Brazil in the 1950s, leading to the creation in 1956

of the celebrated São Paulo Concrete art movement favoring a nonfigurative art based on geometric abstraction, which became synonymous with rationality.⁵ The works coming out of this movement were scientifically and mathematically informed, making use of mechanical movements and following rigorous structures.

By the end of the 1950s the rigid forms of the São Paulo Concrete group would be challenged by the Neoconcrete artists from Rio de Janeiro, who created a more tactile, sensorial art which incorporated the spectator. Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) and Lygia Clark (1920–88), the Neoconcrete movement's main exponents, later became the most internationally well known and acclaimed contemporary Brazilian artists, though each left Brazil in the late 1960s for personal and professional (rather than political) reasons.

Oiticica departed for England by ship on 3 December 1968, coincidentally just ten days before the establishment of Institutional Act #5 (AI-5), to prepare for an exhibition that opened on 24 February 1969 at Whitechapel Gallery in London. He went back to Rio de Janeiro in January 1970 and then departed to New York in June 1970 to participate in the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art. A month later he returned to Rio and by the end of the year he moved to New York after being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, only returning to Rio in January 1978, two years before his death on 22 March 1980. Oiticica was not in Brazil for the most repressive period of the dictatorship; nevertheless, he had a lasting influence on the generation that stayed in Brazil. Clark went to Paris in 1968 and remained there intermittently until 1976, when she returned to Rio. In Paris she taught at the Sorbonne, experimenting with sensorial practices and becoming interested in the relationship between art and therapy. Although the two artists shared the language of constructivist and geometric trends, the Rio de Janeiro Neoconcrete group emphasized subjectivity, experimentation, and intuition.

In its opening paragraph the “Manifesto Neoconcreto” (Neoconcrete Manifesto), written by the poet and art critic Ferreira Gullar in 1959, stated that the Neoconcrete artists aimed to position themselves in opposition to the Concrete art movement, which had become dangerously entrenched in excessive rationalism.⁶ Gullar called for an art that would move away from the mechanical and scientific concerns prevailing in geometric abstraction in Brazil, particularly by relying on the participation of the viewer to activate the space. In 1959 Gullar also wrote the influential “Teoria do não-objeto” (Theory of the Non-Object), which drew on theories of Gestalt and phenomenology to argue for the primacy of perceptual and sensorial experi-

ences over the physical presence of the object of art. According to Gullar, “Without the spectator the work of art only potentially exists, waiting for a human gesture to actualize it.”⁷

Gullar’s stance on the discussions and debates central to the production of the local and international avant-garde, however, did not last long; he became disillusioned with the apolitical tone of the Neoconcrete movement and suggested that all of the group’s production should be destroyed during a final exhibition.⁸ For him, the making of any kind of abstract art, be it geometric abstraction, abstract expressionism, or informal abstraction, was a form of alienation that deprived the public of discerning the real questions raised by artists interested in forging a national identity to Brazil. His writings from the 1960s are indicative of the cultural debate that occupied Brazilians at the time: Should art reflect the specific social and political realities of the place and time in which it was created? Or should Brazil attempt to pursue the same level of modernity as the European avant-gardes? The debate positioned elitist vanguard art against popular revolutionary art. Yet since important figurative artists at that point were adopting the language of Pop art, they became as interested in international trends as abstract artists.⁹

Pop art had come to the country via another groundbreaking biennial: the IX São Paulo Biennial in 1967, known as the Pop Biennial, which featured work by such artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, George Segal, Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Richard Lindner, James Rosenquist, Edward Ruscha, and Tom Wesselmann.¹⁰ Brazilian artists were fascinated by the new visual language of Pop art, but they also had reservations about it since it was seen as a celebration of mass media and consumerism and as a movement driven to advance its acceptance and insertion into the art market.¹¹

Particularly affecting at the IX São Paulo Biennial were three works by Warhol, all from his *Death and Disaster* series (1962–67), in which the artist depicted automobile and airplane crashes, disasters, suicides, electric chairs, atomic bomb explosions, and civil riots. The images in these works came from Warhol’s archive of current news clippings and photojournalistic images.¹² *Orange Disaster #5* (1963) used silkscreen and acrylic to depict, fifteen times, the iconic image of an empty electric chair in the execution chamber of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. *Saturday Disaster* (1964) showed two stacked black-and-white screen-printed images of a fatal car crash. *Jackie* (1964), completed shortly after Presi-

dent John F. Kennedy was assassinated, comprised sixteen close-ups of the widow's face, done in silkscreen.¹³

In this striking series Warhol moved away from affluent consumer culture and entered the political sphere, showing the dark side of consumerism through impacting and disturbing images of tragedy and death.¹⁴ Even if, as it has been argued, the works' repetition annuls their sense of urgency, their vibrant colors restore the anxiety implicit in the paintings. This most morbid and uncharacteristic of Warhol's series—particularly a work from the group that was not shown at the IX São Paulo Biennial, the silkscreened canvas *Red Race Riot* (1963) (see plate 1), showing police dogs being used to attack civil rights demonstrators during riots in Birmingham, Alabama—has similarities in sensibility with Antonio Manuel's *Repressão outra vez—Eis o saldo* (Repression Again—Here is the Consequence) (1968) (see plate 2), a work Manuel showed two years later at the Pre-Paris Biennial in 1969. Manuel's own striking work caused a stir when it triggered the closing of the exhibition that was going to represent Brazil at the VI Youth Paris Biennial that year at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art.¹⁵

Repressão outra vez—Eis o saldo comprises five monumental panels, each covered by a large black cloth with a white string on top of them. At first glance they appeared to be huge geometric, abstract black canvases painted with a long vertical white stripe that became a triangular shape at the bottom. When the viewer got closer to the work, however, it became clear that the black surface was cloth, and the white, supposedly painted lines were actually rope that could be manipulated by the public. When the rope was pulled, the cloth lifted to reveal five oversized canvases, each featuring a red painted background overlaid with silkscreen images (culled from the front pages of the São Paulo newspaper *Última Hora*) of violent clashes between police and students. One of the canvases featured the newspaper's headline "Morreu um Estudante" (A Student Died); farther down on the same panel were the words, "Eis o Saldo: Garoto Morto" (Here's the Consequence: A Kid Is Dead). The work had a lasting impact for its content as well as for its bold visual language. Like Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, Manuel's panels achieved impact and directness through their use of repetition, seriality, and saturated color in the background and black silkscreen ink on top, exaggerating the visual shock while at the same time keeping the layout of newspaper pages. Both artists exhibited great facility for using the media's currency to heighten the dramatic effect of their art.

In the 1960s access to the international contemporary art scene was very

limited—economic realities made travel abroad difficult for most Brazilian artists, unless they were awarded a traveling grant from one of the national salons—and magazines such as *ArtForum*, *Art in America*, *Opius*, and *Domus* were among the only resources available, though difficult to be accessed. When the repressive policies of the military regime began to threaten art exhibitions, at first in smaller regional venues but eventually leading up to the international boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial in 1969, it ended up jeopardizing the access of the local artistic community to one of its main sources of information and exchange. Nevertheless, many of the new artistic tendencies were already in place, and Brazilian artists were aware of them through international publications and reports from friends who were living abroad.

Censorship of the Media and Visual Arts: Laying the Groundwork for the Boycott of the Biennial

On 13 December 1968, a year before the fateful meeting in Paris that led to the French boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial in 1969, the Brazilian military dictatorship cast a watchful eye on the country's media and cultural landscapes with the passage of AI-5. On the day the act was promulgated agents of the military regime arrived at newsrooms throughout the country, asserting control over content to be published and censoring unfavorable press. In São Paulo, *Jornal da Tarde* had part of its edition taken out of circulation before it was released, and *O Estado de São Paulo* was forbidden to circulate altogether. Forces descended upon the newsroom of the leftist newspaper *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro) and demanded to know what the next day's headlines would be, eventually arresting Osvaldo Peralva, the newspaper's editor.¹⁶ When censors arrived at *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro's most important newspaper at the time, Editor in Chief Alberto Dines was determined to circumvent the censors and denounce military control of the press. The next day, a hot December morning, readers saw an unusual headline on the front page of the *Jornal do Brasil*: "Dark clouds. Temperature suffocates. The air is not breathable. Strong winds invade the country."¹⁷

The new rules imposed on the media could not be disclosed by the Brazilian press, but international newspapers were eager to make them public. On 14 January 1969 *Le Monde* (Paris) published an extensive exposé of the new regulations imposed upon Brazilian newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations. It publicized details of the "ten commandments" sent by Gen. Silvio Correa de Andrade, the chief of the federal police of São Paulo,

to the editor in chief of *Folha de São Paulo*; among other mandates, the document demanded respect for the revolution, banned all news concerning the activities of priests as well as the students' and workers' movements, prohibited criticism of the Institutional Acts promulgated by the authorities and the armed forces, and forbade the disclosure of the names of people deprived of their civil rights, even passing references such as baptism announcements and university commencements.¹⁸

While control of the media was imposed in a direct and comprehensible manner, censorship of the visual arts was never clearly defined, and its enforcement was frequently inconsistent. In their daily reality, therefore, visual artists were relatively free to create their work without being directly persecuted or sent into exile. Many factors contributed to this relative liberty for the visual arts: lack of visibility, the ephemeral quality of the art, and the government's view of visual artists as inconsequential and irrelevant all contributed to a laissez-faire attitude on the part of the dictatorship. According to the journalist Elio Gaspari, the regime was not particularly concerned with the visual arts because they were seen as being less noticeable in the public sphere.¹⁹ In a way this helped to protect visual artists from the more dire and tragic reprisals the regime imposed on perceived enemies who had a more overt and visible political agenda.

Though not directly persecuted, visual artists at the time lived in a state of self-censorship because there was no explicit definition of what was considered subversive or offensive by the military regime. In the first years after the dictatorship was established in 1964, art exhibitions with obvious references to leftist icons, such as Che Guevara, or to clashes between police and students were immediately banned by the military regime. Later, the boundaries of what was permitted or not became murkier as censorship of the visual arts was continuously exercised without defined criteria.

Morais argues that the closing of art exhibitions, the prohibition of various artworks, and the persecution of artists, critics, and art professors all demonstrate that the visual arts were indeed deeply affected by censorship in the years following the AI-5. One of the most prominent figures working in the arts in Brazil during the period of the military regime (important curators like Mário Pedrosa and Ferreira Gullar were forced to leave the country and go into exile),²⁰ Morais served as the art critic for the newspapers *Diário de Notícias* (1966–73) and *O Globo* (1975–87) and wrote more than thirty books, including *Depoimento de uma geração, 1969–1970* (Testimony of a Generation, 1969–1970) (1986) and *Cronologia das Artes Plásticas*

no Rio de Janeiro: 1816–1994 (Chronology of the Visual Arts in Rio de Janeiro: 1816–1994) (1995). He was also the director of visual arts and coordinator of courses at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ) from 1967 to 1973, and in this role he not only organized most of the exhibitions discussed in this book but also was a member of the juries of many influential salons throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Morais believes that statistics on censorship in the visual arts, were they to exist, would show that many works of art were banned from shows, or, even worse, whole exhibitions were forbidden to open to the public after they had been installed. He writes, “As opposed to what happened in literature, music, and theater, when an art exhibition was closed, hundreds of works of art were censored at once, meaning that, at one stab, all other statistics in the arts were defeated.”²¹

Since there is as yet no compilation of all the exhibitions and works of art that were censored during the military regime, it is difficult to judge the extent to which the visual arts were suppressed by the repressive rule. But accounts of individual incidents, such as a happening referred to as *Bandeiras na Praça* (Flags in the Square), paint a picture of the uneasy relationship between the arts and the military regime that existed even before the establishment of AI-5. In 1967 at a busy intersection in São Paulo (between avenues Paulista and Europa), the artists Nelson Leirner and Flávio Motta hung colored banners depicting some of the most venerated symbols in Brazil, including soccer teams and popular religious icons, transforming an emblem loaded with national and patriotic meaning into an icon of popular culture. Seeing the demonstration as a provocation of the military regime, local government officials forced Leirner and Motta to take down the flags, citing their lack of a proper permit; the artists were also fined for their actions.²²

A more direct conflict between the military regime and artists took place later that year at the IV Modern Art Salon of Brasília, held at the National Theater in Brasília in December 1967. Police agents went to the exhibition and threatened to remove a controversial painting by Cláudio Tozzi that depicted Che Guevara in what was seen as a rebellious manner—*Guevara, vivo ou morto* (Guevara, Dead or Alive) (1967) (see plate 3). In the upper half of the wooden panel a photograph of Guevara smoking a cigar is flanked by two images of people engaged in acts of protest. In the lower half the same photograph is positioned between two images of little boys looking frightened.²³ After military officers threatened to close the exhibition, Morais, its

coordinator, decided in consultation with the salon jury to cancel the show rather than risk the censoring or removal of any works of art.

The controversy at the Brasília Salon, however, was not limited to the conflict between the government and the artists; tensions escalated between the artist participants and the jury as well. Leirner questioned the art system and the arbitrary rules of the jury, demanding to know their criteria for accepting his submission, *O porco* (The Pig) (1967) (see plate 4), a work composed of a life-size stuffed pig in a crate.

Leirner wrote an article in *Jornal da Tarde* on 21 December 1967, illustrated with a photo of his *O porco* next to the question, "Which criterion?" Posing a question that more commonly follows the *exclusion* of a work or artist, Leirner's article was intended as an overt provocation of the jury.²⁴ In his reply to Leirner, Morais wrote, "Why did you wait for the work to be admitted before taking the issue to the newspapers? What is more, if your pig had not been accepted, you would have asked the same question in reverse. Here's what I would reply: Your pig would have been rejected for the same reasons that now made me admit it."²⁵ On 11 February 1968 Mário Pedrosa responded to Leirner in his column in *Correio da Manhã*. The article, entitled "Do porco empalhado, ou os critérios da crítica" (On the Stuffed Pig, or the Criteria for Criticism), contextualized Leirner's attitude, placing it in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's appropriations of manufactured products.²⁶ Some fifty years earlier, in 1917, Duchamp had famously challenged the arbitrary nature of exhibition juries with his submission of a white porcelain urinal titled *Fountain* and signed with the pseudonym R. Mutt to the first exhibition organized by the Society of Independent Artists in New York.²⁷ Leirner's submission of *O porco* five decades after so much had already been said on the subject could have been considered a joke in poor taste; instead, his attitude resonated in the press, resulting in thoughtful and thorough responses by Pedrosa and Morais, both art critics held in high esteem. In the context of the time, the incident reignited a debate about the arbitrariness of taste and artistic criteria, which served as a metaphor for the absence of defined rules of censorship by the regime. In a way, it can be said that both art criticism and censorship of the arts were exercised randomly.

The IV Modern Art Salon of Brasília became something of a landmark event in Brazilian art: it was the first exhibition to be overtly censored by the military regime, a year before the promulgation of AI-5. It also was among the first to draw attention to an artistic community outside the limits of Rio

de Janeiro and São Paulo, considered the hegemonic centers of art in Brazil; such notice did much to establish Brasília as another pole for the arts. This shift toward a decentralized artistic community would become vitally important, allowing emerging artists and smaller venues increased visibility on the national stage. But perhaps most important, the event became central to a larger discourse about the subjective nature of art criticism as it was exercised by juries, scholars, and arbiters of taste.

In December 1968, one year before the historic X São Paulo Biennial, a modest exhibition rose to visibility on a national level when it became one of the first victims of the newly minted AI-5. The II National Biennial of Bahia took place at Lapa Convent in Salvador, Bahia, in the northeast of Brazil. On the biennial's opening night, the governor of Bahia, Luiz Vianna Filho, had given a memorable speech, declaring, "All young art has to be revolutionary. . . . Freedom characterizes art."²⁸ Twenty-four hours later the exhibition was ordered closed by the military regime under allegations of erotic and overtly political content. Federal police seized the venue and confiscated ten works of art. The exhibition organizers were jailed.

Among the objectionable works in the II National Biennial of Bahia was a monumental red silkscreen panel by Antonio Manuel reproducing newspaper images and headlines about the clashes between police and students. The work vanished in the raid. Later, Manuel learned through the French art critic Pierre Restany that it had been burned by the army.²⁹ In an interview with Lúcia Carneiro and Ileana Pradilla, Manuel recalled,

I don't remember another occasion which I had feared as much as the II National Biennial of Bahia. Some time before, I had made a serigraphy of Che Guevara to help political activists that needed money. Then I saw at *Jornal da Bahia* a headline saying "Arms apprehended in a terrorist cell," and beside the story there was a photograph of my serigraphy. I was advised to return immediately to Rio de Janeiro. I took a bus, and put my name, phone, and address inside a matchbox and a note explaining my situation. Fortunately, nothing happened to me.³⁰

His statement attests to the strong sense of self-censorship and fear of disciplinary actions that affected artists in the years following the AI-5. When sanctions could vary from mild to drastic punishment without any warning, no one felt safe from the threat of persecution.

In the spring of 1969, amid growing unease in the artistic community, the censors struck again in what became the most serious episode leading



3. Evandro Teixeira, *A queda do motociclista da FAB* (The Fall of the FAB Motorcyclist) (1965). Photograph.

up to the boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial. The Pre-Paris Biennial, scheduled to open on 29 May 1969 at the MAM/RJ, was intended as a preview of sorts for the VI Youth Paris Biennial at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art (October to November 1969). From the 160 works of art submitted, 12 had been chosen to represent Brazil in the categories of painting, engraving, photography, sculpture, and architecture. All the artworks submitted to the jury were to be on view at MAM/RJ until the end of June, when the selected works would be sent to Paris.³¹ Among the works to be on display at the exposition, several were considered provocative. Evandro Teixeira, a photo-journalist from *Jornal do Brasil*, had submitted a photograph from 1965 of a Brazilian Air Force (FAB) motorcyclist falling to the ground during a street riot, an image that made the police look foolish (figure 3). Manuel's series *Repressão outra vez—Eis o saldo* (1968) was another instigative submission, as it called attention to conflicts between police and students, inviting viewers to expose images from the news media by lifting up the dark curtains that obscured them. As the art critic Paulo Venâncio Filho poetically wrote of this work, "The pull of string and a black curtain unveils the tragic news, the beautiful funereal standard of rebelliousness."³²

But Brazilian audiences would see neither these contentious works nor any of the other submissions; the Pre-Paris Biennial was shut down by the police before it opened to the public.³³ At 11:00 A.M. on 29 May Gen. César Montagna de Souza, the commander of the First Military Region of Rio de Janeiro, arrived at MAM/RJ to view the artworks, which were installed and awaiting the biennial's opening that evening. A short while later Maurício Roberto, the director of MAM/RJ, received a phone call from Ambassador Donatello Grieco, head of the cultural department of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, the office that had originally commissioned MAM/RJ to select the artists to represent Brazil at the VI Youth Paris Biennial. Grieco ordered the suspension of the exhibition; an official diplomat, sent personally to the museum, reiterated the decree. In a note to the press, José de Magalhães Pinto, minister of foreign relations, clarified the decision: "There was an abuse of trust, because the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro was instructed to avoid choosing any work of art with a political or ideological connotation." Magalhães Pinto also alleged that the museum was supposed to consult the minister of foreign relations before disclosing the result to the public and had failed to do so.³⁴

At the time, the executive director of MAM/RJ was the rebellious Niomar Moniz Sodré Bittencourt, a woman who had found herself at odds with the military regime before. As the owner of the newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, Moniz Sodré had led a fearless campaign against the excesses of the military government; as punishment, the newspaper was systematically censored, had its circulation suspended several times, and suffered from a strict economic blockade. Now, she found herself under attack again:

We were under censorship. Mário Pedrosa had selected the works that were going to the VI Youth Paris Biennial. The exhibition was already installed and the invitations distributed for the opening at 6:00 PM. I was at the headquarters of the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* when I got a phone call saying that the military had entered the Museum and closed the door that gave access to the exhibit. They alleged that it was a subversive exhibition. Afraid that there could be some other way to access the exhibition, they took down all the works of art and put them in the Museum's storage.³⁵

Manuel recalls that days later Moniz Sodré, whom he did not know personally, called and asked him to meet with her: "She had asked the staff of the Museum to hide as many works as possible. I was sitting on her sofa when she

said, ‘Look, your paintings are behind you.’”³⁶ Moniz Sodré had purchased two of the panels of *Repressão outra vez—Eis o saldo* and was safeguarding them in her apartment. This was Manuel’s first sale, though the works were eventually destroyed in a fire in her apartment.³⁷ She told Manuel he was being pursued by the political police, the Departamento de Ordem Política e Social, and advised him to leave the country. As he had no place to go, Moniz Sodré invited him to stay at her home for a few days. Manuel was scared but unwilling to stop producing art because of censorship; he had a strong, rebellious nature, perhaps owing to his youth: “I needed to express it, and I did it through art. I had a huge energy and was willing to take risks. I had the romantic idea that my work would change things.”³⁸ The Pre-Paris Biennial episode contributed to a general aura of suspicion from the military regime surrounding MAM/RJ. Director Maurício Roberto remembered, “The troops effectively invaded the exhibition’s space. After that moment, the Museum started having a subversive connotation and from then on a military patrol was always parked in front of it.”³⁹ The banning of the Pre-Paris Biennial proved not only that Brazilian artists suffered under local censorship, but also that the entire international artistic community was affected, a resentment that culminated in the major national and international boycott of the X São Paulo Biennial a year later.

“How Can We Submit Ourselves to These Lamentable Conditions?” The X São Paulo Biennial and the International Boycott

The X São Paulo Biennial followed the Pop Biennial of 1967, the seminal international exhibition that had exposed the country to so many important movements just two years earlier. The international boycott, therefore, represented far more than a canceled exhibition: it was a stunning blow to the exhibition’s influence as the catalyst for the latest developments in the visual arts in Latin America. The boycott of the São Paulo biennials was not lifted until a decade later, in 1979, when the Brazilian government granted amnesty to political prisoners.

Discrete incidents of dissent created the first stirrings of a widespread boycott, starting in the summer prior to the X São Paulo Biennial. Eduard de Wilde, the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, withdrew his delegation on 10 June 1969, declaring that he and his artists could not accept the current political circumstances of Brazil.⁴⁰ All the efforts of the

Brazilian embassy to try to reverse the situation through negotiations with the Dutch government were in vain. As awareness of the political situation in Brazil spread, it seemed other countries might soon follow suit.

Early on, the cancellation of a parallel exhibition, *Art and Technology*—which was being organized by Pierre Restany and was to have included works by César, Gyula Kosice, Piotr Kowalski, Julio Le Parc, Marta Minujin, Bernard Quentin, Martial Raysse, and Vassilakis Takis among others—was a harbinger of more dissent. In a letter written to a Brazilian friend Restany indicated he could not work in a country lacking a free press: “There is a true feeling of solidarity among French intellectuals towards their Brazilian colleagues, representing a moral victory to the Brazilian intelligentsia.”⁴¹ When Restany resigned, around thirty invitations had already been sent to artists to participate in the show. On 6 June the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (Milan) published a report entitled “Lo Scandalo di San Paolo—La Biennale rischia per la situazione politica del Brasile” (The Scandal of São Paulo—The Biennial Is at Risk because of the Political Situation in Brazil),⁴² in which it was reported that each of the Italian artists selected for *Art and Technology* would join Restany in refusing to participate. The majority of the artists supported his decision as well and opted to withdraw. According to Restany, the Brazilian embassy in Paris was receiving anxious telegrams daily from Cicillo Matarazzo about the gravity of the situation, but they were powerless in France to change the course of events.

Widespread momentum behind the boycott started to build at the historical meeting of 16 June at the Paris City Museum of Modern Art, a meeting precipitated by growing antipathy among artists and intellectuals regarding France’s troubled participation in the biennial. The nine artists originally chosen by the art critic Gerald Gassiot-Talabot had already refused to participate, and the selection of a second, provisional delegation had provoked heated controversy. On 23 December 1968 the *Nouvel Observateur* (Paris) published a story entitled “Petite histoire d’une sélection” (Short Story of a Selection) detailing the first stirrings of dissent regarding the biennial. The article reported that Gassiot-Talabot had received a letter announcing the withdrawal of his nine artists and had himself resigned in response.⁴³ In their joint statement, the nine artists condemned the repressive regime and drew a parallel between the political situation in Brazil and the events of May 1968 in France: “The political situation in France after the May events, especially the ones concerning freedom of expression and the rights of foreigners living in France, makes it impossible to represent the current French

government in an international biennial, which itself is based on an outmoded set of national representations, with the distribution of prizes in a climate of competition and encouragement of nationalism and mercantilism.”⁴⁴ The art critic Yvon Taillandier was invited to be the new French commissary and was immediately attacked by the French press.⁴⁵ The *Nouvel Observateur* accused him of taking the “still-warm seat” of Gassiot-Talabot and overriding the will of the dissenting artists. The article, which suggested that Taillandier had already covertly selected another group, concluded with a question steeped in reproach: “Would there be in the School of Paris seven artists to play the strikebreakers?”⁴⁶

As a meeting convened to decide the fate of a second delegation, reception among the gathered crowd was mixed. One group favored French participation at the X São Paulo Biennial, arguing that the choice should be based upon individual artists’ decisions. A second faction claimed that the artists selected were representatives of the School of Paris and that the decision to participate or withdraw should be made collectively on that agency’s behalf. This group also offered that French refusal to participate would affect a large section of the public expected to attend the biennial and would make a strong statement of international solidarity in the face of the Brazilian military dictatorship. The group stated the issue in terms of upholding national principles: “French art and culture have always been an example of freedom and intellectual power. How can we submit ourselves to these lamentable conditions?”⁴⁷ Reading aloud from the dossier, “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo,” adherents of this second position went on to exhort French artists to refuse to participate in the X São Paulo Biennial: “French artists who participate in this biennial do a disservice that cannot be repaired. They will miss the chance to combat the inhuman conditions established in Brazil, especially after December 1968. They will contribute to the prosperity of the blind ideas of fascism in a country marked by underdevelopment, in a country that needs free and intelligent spirits to escape a total disaster. After some time the emotions will be totally destroyed and we will fear a terrible future for Brazil. So, why does France not refuse to participate?”⁴⁸ In the end, the decision to refuse participation reached an overwhelming consensus: of the crowd assembled that day, 321 individuals affixed their names to the resolution, and only 3 dissented.

Support for an international boycott seemed to have reached its tipping point at the Paris meeting, with delegations from the United States, Hol-

land, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Mexico, and Spain soon issuing similar decrees. In Mexico, David Alfaro Siqueiros, the last and most politically active of the three great Mexican muralists, announced his refusal to participate on 19 June. Then seventy-three years of age, Siqueiros had been invited to present his mural *March of Humanity on Latin America*. The artist said that after he learned that artists from France, Belgium, Holland, and Sweden had initiated a protest against the biennial, he had decided to withdraw his work. He asked painters from all over the world to join the boycott in protest of the Brazilian military regime.⁴⁹

In Sweden, the director of the Stockholm Museum of Modern Art, Pontus Hultén, the commissary for the X São Paulo Biennial, also declined the participation of his country. However, as reported by the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (Stockholm), the Swedish works of art had already been sent to Brazil and were presently expected at the port of Santos in São Paulo. After a diplomatic intervention, the crates did not leave the ship when it arrived at Santos and instead were immediately returned, circumventing a potentially embarrassing situation for the Brazilian government and the biennial's sponsors. According to *Svenska Dagbladet*, the Swedish government had allowed the artist Roj Friberg to send works depicting the U.S. president, Lyndon Johnson, and the Brazilian president, Gen. Artur da Costa e Silva, in a highly critical way. The content of Friberg's works had tellingly been concealed by their vague titles: *Drawing 1*, *Drawing 2*, and *Drawing 3*.⁵⁰

The U.S. Withdrawal

In the United States, withdrawal from the X São Paulo Biennial was an involved process occurring over a period of several weeks, and it took a different shape from the one in Paris. The Hungarian-born professor György Kepes, the director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), was organizing a cutting-edge exhibition that, like Restany's offering, was based on the theme of art and technology.⁵¹ Early speculation held that it would be the pièce de résistance of that year's São Paulo Biennial. The first indication of the exhibition's uncertain future came in the form of a letter from Hans Haacke, who had been invited to participate in the exhibition. Writing to Kepes on 22 April 1969, Haacke declared that under the circumstances he could not be part of a show that was being sponsored by the United States abroad. He wrote,

The foreign policy of the U.S. government is a potential obstacle to all exhibitions that occur under American auspices. . . . Unfortunately, we do not live in a time where an art exhibit can be seen and presented simply for itself. The American government is engaged in an immoral war in Vietnam and supports vigorously the fascist regimes in Brazil and in other parts of the world. At this time, all exhibitions under the auspices of the American government are done to promote the image and the politics of this very government. It is a public relations operation no matter what the intentions of the organizers and participants are, and thanks to the tolerance of repressive governments, the energy of the artists is channeled to serve a policy that they rightfully despise. If they don't want to become involuntary accomplices they do not have another choice than to refuse to show their work in the national representations abroad.⁵²

After “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” circulated in New York, Haacke’s position began to resonate with a growing number of artists and intellectuals in North America. Many of the artists selected by Kepes were represented by the Howard Wise Gallery in New York City, which specialized in works of art related to technology.⁵³ Therefore, it is unsurprising that these artists decided en masse to boycott the biennial. Harold Tovish and Jack Burnham, colleagues of Kepes’s at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, also denounced the U.S. government’s support of the Brazilian dictatorship and contested the merits of taking part in the event. Burnham alleged that the statement he had written for the biennial’s catalogue had been rejected because of the blunt terms in which he had referred to the Brazilian situation. He said, “The Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT and its associates are fully aware of the complicity between the United States military and economic policy and the present intolerable dictatorship in Brazil. . . . The people of Brazil are in the grip of a military dictatorship which has the full support of the administration in Washington. Under these conditions, what possible honor is there for an artist to participate in the São Paulo Biennial?”⁵⁴ Eventually, nine of the twenty-three artists selected for Kepes’s show—Stephen Antonakos, Jack Burnham, John Goodyear, Hans Haacke, Tom Lloyd, Charles Ross, Robert Smithson, Vassilakis Takis, and Harold Tovish—would join the boycott. While Haacke accused the United States of being engaged in a war with Vietnam and of supporting dictatorships all over the world, the Greek-born Takis capitalized on the situation to denounce the lack of democracy in Greece, recalling a situation similar to

that of the X São Paulo Biennial that had transpired in 1964. In a letter to Restany, Takis recounted how, when the Greek government asked him to do a Greek pavilion at the Venice Biennial of 1964, he had taken a stand, answering that he would do it only if the government of Karamanlis deposed the king and installed democracy in the country.⁵⁵

On 6 July 1969 the *New York Times* published an extensive article by the art critic Grace Glueck disclosing the latest developments in the international boycott against the São Paulo Biennial. Titled “No Rush for Reservations,” the article asserted that even in face of the international boycott there was still a possibility that Kepes’s exhibition would represent the United States at the biennial. Glueck wrote, “György Kepes—Hungarian-born and a fighter for many liberal causes—let it be known that despite his deep respect and acceptance of the artists’ positions, he believed in keeping the lines of communication open . . . because in the long run [the] chances of communicating deeply held ideas without compromise can have a far greater positive impact on Brazilian life than can be accomplished by a boycott.”⁵⁶ Glueck reported that Kepes went on to quote an old Chinese saying: “It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.”⁵⁷

This was not the first time that some of the artists involved in the international boycott had made headlines in the *New York Times* for their political stand. Both Haacke and Takis were founding members of the Art Workers’ Coalition in New York, an organization founded in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War and to advocate for artists’ rights. Haacke had joined Takis’s earlier protest on 3 January 1969 to dispute the unauthorized display of one of his sculptures in the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in the exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*.⁵⁸ Takis stormed into MoMA and unplugged his kinetic piece *Tele-sculpture* (1960), alleging that, although MoMA owned the sculpture, he had not agreed to show it in the exhibition. He issued a flyer announcing his action as the first in a series of acts against the stagnant policies of art museums all over the world.⁵⁹

Haacke observed, “The art world in the 1960s was quite alert in the way artists reacted to world events by deciding not to participate in major art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennial in 1968 and the São Paulo Biennial in 1969.” Perhaps more surprising, therefore, is that so many chose to stay in the show, disregarding their fellow artists’ objections. Among the fourteen remaining artists was the sculptor Charles Frazier, who took a bold position in a letter written to Kepes: “If some of the artists and delegations had not withdrawn, they would have the opportunity for their collective voice to be

heard all over the world, which would allow for a different kind of protest against the Brazilian government.”⁶⁰

Kepes was disappointed with the withdrawal of nearly half the artists he had selected, as he imagined this exhibition as a unique opportunity to showcase technological art and artists. But after a drawn-out effort to maintain the U.S. representation, he gave up, deciding that his exhibition, in light of the departure of so many of the artists involved, would no longer have a strong impact. In an article in the *New York Times* titled “São Paulo Show Loses U.S. Entry,” Sidney Dillon Ripley, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which sponsored the U.S. delegation in the São Paulo biennials, was quoted as saying he “deeply lament[ed] that the people of Brazil, of Latin America, and other parts of the world [would] be deprived of an opportunity to see the novel and exciting exhibition that Professor Kepes and his colleagues had been preparing.”⁶¹

The United States ended up being represented by Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichaeli, a Greek-born American sculptor, who showed only one work, *Gates to Times Square* (1964–66), a neon assemblage using lights and letters. Her work was placed in a space next to an exhibition of French tapestries. According to the art historian Aracy Amaral, “The art critic Harold Rosenberg found [Chryssa’s participation] shameful.”⁶²

Brazil and the X São Paulo Biennial

In Brazil a number of local artists and critics announced their refusal to participate. On 10 June 1969 Oiticica addressed a letter to the French delegation stating that France should not participate in the event. Following the historic Paris meeting on 16 June, Walmir Ayala reported in *Jornal do Brasil* on 1 July 1969 that the first artists to withdraw from the Brazilian delegation were Lygia Clark (via a telegram that did not state her reasons) and Amélia Toledo (who said she did not agree with the biennial’s criteria). There were to be three special rooms by the artists Maria Bonomi, Sérgio Camargo, and Maria Martins, but all were canceled. The sculptor Camargo, based in Paris, did not accept his invitation; the printmaker Bonomi sent a letter to the president of the biennial declining her invitation; and Martins alleged she did not have enough works to exhibit. The MAM/RJ also decided not to co-operate with the biennial; when this resolution was communicated to all embassies, it had a domino effect, provoking countless defections throughout Brazil.⁶³

While a sense of solidarity was pervasive in the artistic community, a number of individuals felt that strategic participation in the biennial would do more to call attention to the problem of censorship than the relatively passive act of leaving the space empty. Some credit is due to this position since in the end the opening of the X São Paulo Biennial took place almost as if nothing had happened: much of the general public was unaware of the extent of the boycott or even of its existence. Intended as a resolution to raise awareness of repressive circumstances and to mobilize broader outreach, the boycott instead became more of a circumscribed discussion among art-world insiders. Yet it is undeniable that it did much to mobilize the artistic community, creating an intense international polemic on ethics in a field dominated by aesthetics.

The international press, including the *Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Monde*, *Corriere della Sera*, and the *New York Times*, had better coverage of the boycott than the Brazilian media. The source that kept Brazilians best informed on the latest developments related to the biennial was Pedrosa's daily column in the *Correio da Manhã*. A Marxist militant, Pedrosa had joined the Communist Party in 1925, only to be expelled four years later for his Trotskyite position; in the year after the boycott, he would be prosecuted for speaking abroad about the government's use of torture, leaving the country in exile for Chile in 1970, where he remained until the overthrow and death of President Salvador Allende in 1973. He moved to Mexico and then to France, returning to Brazil in 1977, when his arrest warrant was revoked. Pedrosa was the main liaison of the boycott abroad. He revealed that, after the French withdrawal from the event, the French art critic Jacques Lassaigne, the president of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and of the Paris Biennial, was barred from serving on the jury of the X São Paulo Biennial and declared persona non grata by the Brazilian government.⁶⁴ The minor participation of international art critics in the symposium organized by the biennial was likely in response to the degradation of Lassaigne.⁶⁵

On 2 July 1969 the Brazilian Association of Art Critics (ABC) — the Brazilian section of the International Association of Art Critics,⁶⁶ presided over by Pedrosa — released a document appealing for a clear delineation of specific criteria for the censorship of visual arts, so as not to be taken by surprise. Censorship of the visual arts, after all, was not included in the Brazilian constitution, and its exercise by the military dictatorship had been inconsistent and ostensibly arbitrary. The document resolved that until the current form of unlawful and undefined censorship was abolished by gov-

ernmental decision, ABCA would recommend to its members and associates that they refuse to participate in official salons, national or international; and would ask any members currently involved in official functions to withdraw.⁶⁷ The association stated its determination to engage in the fight against censorship as a matter of necessity, standing as it did for the freedom of creation and in defense of the free exercise of art criticism: “In our country, cinema and theater already live under censorship. We don’t want to see this repeated in relation to salons and biennials. In the episode of the selection of artists for the VI Youth Paris Biennial organized by MAM/RJ, everything indicated that there is also censorship in the field of the visual arts.” The group’s statement reached a wider audience when it was published by Pedrosa (writing under the pseudonym Luís Rodolpho when dealing with controversial issues in the press) in the *Correio da Manhã* for 10 July 1969, in an article entitled “Os deveres do crítico de arte na sociedade” (The Obligations of the Art Critic toward Society).⁶⁸

Matarazzo, the president of the São Paulo Biennial Foundation (1951–75), tried his best to counteract the growing repudiation of the event, emphasizing its importance as a unique opportunity for Latin American artists to gain exposure to the latest artistic developments in Europe and North America and comparing it to the prestigious Venice Biennial. He argued that the São Paulo biennials were critical to maintaining Brazil’s place on the international arts circuit; as opposed to artists in Europe, where neighboring countries engaged freely in artistic exchange, Latin American artists relied on the biennial to stay apprised of new trends and ideas.

In a more pointed defense, the São Paulo Biennial Foundation distributed an official document to the international press in which it refuted the accusations made in “Non à la Biennale de São Paulo” and assigned blame to the exhibition organizers for requesting that the international commissaries avoid selecting erotic or political art. The foundation tried to dissociate itself from the Brazilian government, labeling itself “an entity without religious or political beliefs, exclusively dedicated to the promotion of the arts and science.” In reality, this was a problematic claim; try as it might to appear wholly apart from the military dictatorship, the foundation relied on the financial support of the Brazilian government. Despite all the efforts to safeguard it, the X São Paulo Biennial would henceforth be remembered as the Boycott Biennial.

In the end the X São Paulo Biennial featured the participation of over fifty countries with a total of approximately 510 visual artists. The British dele-

gation decided to go to Brazil and witness the political situation firsthand rather than joining the international boycott based on hearsay.⁶⁹ Argentina, which was represented at the biennial by lesser-known artists officially sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Relations, accused France and the United States of sabotaging this major Latin American event in order to maintain their cultural hegemony. The real absence from Argentina's representation was the art critic Jorge Romero Brest, who was fundamental in promoting vanguard art in Latin America during his tenure at the Institute Torcuato Di Tella (1963–69), in Buenos Aires.⁷⁰ Romero Brest had helped to create the São Paulo biennials, participating in its juries and in the selection of its main prizes, and his deliberate nonattendance (as well as Pedrosa's) was keenly felt in the panel on international art criticism. The discussion, which took as its focus the reformulation of future exhibitions of art, went on as planned, but very few art critics took part in it.⁷¹

At the opening of the X São Paulo Biennial on 27 September 1969 there was no public demonstration and no grand protest. Despite the controversy that had played out on three continents over as many months, the general audience was scarcely aware of the international boycott; the local press, controlled in large part by Matarazzo, had not covered the boycott in any depth.⁷² In the end, the exhibition was opened to the public almost as if nothing had happened.

The Rio de Janeiro press was far more eager to report the misfortunes of the most important cultural event held in São Paulo. Though it has lessened in recent years, a well-documented rivalry has long existed between Paulistas, people born in São Paulo, and Cariocas, people from Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo is the country's center of industry and efficiency, while Rio is better known for its bohemian lifestyle. The critics of *Jornal do Brasil* and *Correio da Manhã*, at the time the two most influential newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, had opposing viewpoints concerning the international boycott. Pedrosa used his column in *Correio da Manhã* to strongly advocate for the cause. On the other side was Ayala, the art critic for *Jornal do Brasil* and a member of the official jury that selected the Brazilian representation at the biennial. In his column he criticized the ABCA document petitioning for a clear censorship policy from the government and accused the international artistic community of letting itself be manipulated by Brazilian artists and intellectuals living abroad, suggesting they may have been acting on biased accounts and misinformation.⁷³

Despite all the controversy around the withdrawals from the event, the

most damaging consequence of the boycott was to make the biennial an un-substantial artistic exhibition. In its wake there was a need to create alternative venues to exhibit works exploring nontraditional mediums as well as to show works of art that addressed the dilemmas created by the repressive measures imposed by the military regime.

While the X São Paulo Biennial was a failed event in some respects—one in a growing list of casualties of Brazil's repressive regime—it was not without its bright moments. Mira Schendel's installation *Ondas paradas de probabilidade—Antigo Testamento, Livro dos Reis I, 19* (Still Waves of Probability—Old Testament, Book of Kings I, 19) (1969) was among the most impressive works at the biennial. Nylon threads hung from the ceiling to the floor, creating an installation that looked like a translucent, clouded curtain. The work was accompanied by a biblical text:

And a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire still a small voice.

And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, "What doest thou here, Elijah?"⁷⁴

The effect was quietly mournful and undeniably powerful, a metaphor for the sense of abandonment felt during the dictatorship. Schendel's presence at the biennial was an act of protest different from that of her peers who had withdrawn from the show, one that questioned the efficacy and force of artistic removal as a political strategy.

After the international boycott in 1969, the São Paulo Biennial, once the main catalyst for the newest trends in visual arts in Brazil, from the advent of Grupo Ruptura and the subsequent Concrete art movement to the introduction of Pop art into the country's visual vernacular, was fundamentally changed. Facing a transformed country, lacking clear direction, and isolated from international artistic influences, visual artists were left adrift, forced to forge their own path through a changed cultural landscape, navigating the shadowy boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden along the way.

The years to come were characterized by *vazio cultural* (cultural emptiness), a term coined by the journalist Zuenir Ventura in the magazine *Visão*

(July 1971) to characterize the desolation of the cultural landscape.⁷⁵ Ventura described a devastating time, one marked by “the disappearance of political themes and controversy in the cultural sphere, the evasion of the best brains, the exodus of artists, the purge in the universities, the plunge of sales of newspapers, books, and magazines, the second-rate quality of television programs, the emergence of false aesthetic values, and the hegemony of mass culture.”⁷⁶ Yet despite the prevalent notion that the dictatorship, and specifically the AI-5 and its concomitant censorship, had created a vacuum of artistic endeavors, there was in fact a strong and vital artistic production during the dictatorship. The Brazilian artistic community, in its need to overcome the limitations imposed by the regime, emerged from the period with a renewed sense of resourcefulness, a reinvigoration born of the drive to resist the repressive moments of political turmoil.

In face of the authoritarian, culturally stagnant power of the military regime, visual artists did not suppress their desire to speak up, to participate, and to continue the movement toward modernity and internationalism. Their search for novel artistic production took on a new shape, shifting from international exhibitions and grand gestures to local exhibitions and impromptu artistic happenings. Exhibitions such as *Salão da Bússola* (Compass Salon) at the MAM/RJ (1969), *Do Corpo à Terra* (From the Body to the Earth) at the Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (1970), *O Sermão da Montanha: Fiat Lux* (The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux) at Cândido Mendes University Gallery in Rio de Janeiro (conceived in 1973, but only executed in 1979), among others, occupied the void and ultimately fulfilled the failed mission of the X São Paulo Biennial: to introduce new artistic tendencies to the country. Because of the lack of participation and interest in the X São Paulo Biennial, many artists opted to send their works instead to these local exhibitions, transforming them into a landmark for contemporary Brazilian art.

It was a time marked by uncertainty and upheaval, by shifting boundaries and unspoken fear, but also one ripe for new trends in the visual arts that would shake archaic structures and forge fresh modes of artistic expression. This new cultural landscape was fertile soil for the three young and at the time obscure artists Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles, whose actions and interventions became paradigmatic of a new age of blurring mediums and defying boundaries. Eschewing self-restraint, Manuel, Barrio, and Meireles displayed artistic ingenuity and perseverance in the face of repression. The artists pioneered new modes of self-expression

and embraced artistic trends whose ephemeral, impermanent qualities were well suited to evading government censorship. Manuel's modified version of body art and his elaborate media-based artworks, Barrio's insistence on perishable materials and his search for a new aesthetics for the third world, and Meireles's investigation into conceptual art practices stood for the most memorable moments of a period that was among the most challenging in Brazilian cultural history.